

AMOS AND THE HERMENEUTICAL PRIVILEGE OF THE POOR

This paper illustrates the kind of exegesis and interpretation which would be undertaken by a biblical scholar applying the lens of liberation theology to a given text – in this case, the epilogue to the Book of Amos. For the convenience of the reader, the selected text is included at Annex A. Before exploring the text a brief discussion of the approach of liberation theology will be undertaken, followed by a brief commentary to put the Book of Amos into context..

In “*Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*”, Curt Cadorette writes that liberation theologians approach the Bible as a source of continuing revelation rather than as a collection of ancient writings. Moreover, he notes , in base Christian communities the Bible is the central book used to help members understand their faith and their task in the world.”¹ By reading and discussing the texts, people come to realize that their struggle for justice is part of God’s plan for creation. They interpret the Bible in light of their own lives, experiences and struggles.

In another vein, Carlos Mesters remarked that the common people are very close to Abraham with their feet. By this he means they are living the same sort of situation. They can identify with him; and when they read his story in the Bible it is a mirror to them. In a real sense they are reading their own history. If he got there, they will too.²

In the developing world, the experience of people living in rural villages, barrios or slums led to identification with stories and songs from the Bible. The Old Testament, in particular, reflects their own lives and experience. It is relevant to their own social, economic and political situation – their struggle for emancipation. The image of God that emerges in the Old Testament is one who takes sides with those who suffer unjustly at the hands of the wealthy and powerful. As Mary Snyder says, “This God delivered the Israelites from slavery

¹ Curt Cadorette et al, Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 8

² Carlos Mesters, The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People, in Curt Cadorette et al, Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 47

and dehumanization under the Pharaoh in Egypt. This God raised up prophets like Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others to denounce individuals and societies who victimized the poor,”³ They came to think of this God as a God of the people, a God who stands by them when they are oppressed and exploited, a God will act on their behalf to liberate and free them from their slavery⁴

As a result of such experiences in the developing world, two particular hermeneutical tools were developed.

The “Hermeneutical Privilege of the Poor” encourages us to read the Bible and its history through the eyes of the poor and powerless. This is particularly appropriate with the Old Testament books. The stories of mothers and fathers in Genesis 12-50 are family stories of births and deaths, marriages and migrations, of hopes, fears and conflicts of individuals and groups; people who live at the margins, outside the centers of civilization and culture, a people who had their roots outside the centers where the ‘important’ people lived. Exodus tells the story of a small group of slaves, their suffering and poverty and struggle. These themes are continued in the Prophetic Books and the Writings; and continue to speak to people today who are in similar situations; and who, indeed, may be living in quite similar accommodation and circumstances.⁵

The “Hermeneutic of Suspicion” acknowledges that theology and exegesis are done by experts, and reflects their concerns and questions. These experts came to realize that the text itself was the product of specific times, places and groups of people at various levels on the social, economic and political scales – people with a variety of concerns and interests. Therefore, questions are continually asked both with regard to the interpreter and to the text itself to identify and analyze biases and emphases. This particular tool has proven to be of great use to feminist theology.

The Book of Amos is a particularly prominent example of the usefulness of the Hermeneutical Privilege of the Poor. Amos’ passion arose from first hand knowledge of the destructive pressures and deep suffering his people were

³ Mary Hembrow Snyder, Spirituality and Liberation, in Cadorette, 223

⁴ Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S. Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 9

⁵ *ibid*, 10-11

undergoing as a result of injustices perpetrated by the ruling class. His moral outrage was provoked by the suffering and hardship he saw around him; compounded by the that heart-breaking realization injustice in Israelite society doomed his world to extinction

After the Hebrews were freed from Egyptian rule, Israel itself became an oppressor and expanded its domain at the expense of poorer and weaker peoples and exacted tribute from them. At the same time, the rulers and influential groups in Israel became oppressors of their own country and impoverished the lowly of the nation.⁶

Profound changes introduced to state under monarchic apparatus of David and Solomon had paved the way for stratification of society. They had reached a logical conclusion by time of Amos, when wealth and resources were concentrated in hands of an ever smaller, wealthier, more arrogant ruling class. Amos was particularly irked by accumulation of properties into large estates by the wealthy.⁷ The foundation of socio-economic order under the tribal confederation had been possession, by each extended family, of their own dwelling and land sufficient to provide basic necessities of life to its members. Provisions for mutual aid and support were made among extended families of the clan, among clans that formed tribes, and among tribes themselves within the larger confederation. The foundational vision was that of a people joined together in common project of building a just and peaceful community, guided by and animated by covenant loyalty to their common God, Yahweh; and grounded on the right of access to sources of life's basic necessities and provisions of mutual aid.⁸

These provisions were being crushed and discarded in Amos's time. Motivated by greed, and a lust for power, the nobility and wealthy merchant classes ignored their covenant obligations to fellow Israelites. Instead of low or no-interest loans to help families through periods of economic hardship they charged exorbitant interest rates of fifty percent or more. When people could not pay, they seized the land, and evicted the occupants or reduced them to near slavery as tenant farmers. They grew rich and built magnificent palaces – gave

⁶ Tamaz, 20

⁷ Ceresko, 181

⁸ ibid

great banquets, bought costly furnishings for their homes, and even derived profit from worship and religion by means of rituals and sacrifices.⁹

Landlords added to the hardships of the people by converting land used to produce food for consumption to growing crops like grapes and olives, used to produce luxury commodities like wine and oil. As they increased land and wealth, the ruling classes increased social and political power. Eventually they were able to enforce levying taxes to siphon off more wealth from general population.¹⁰ As a result, during Jeroboam II's reign, a time of prosperity equal to or greater than the time of Solomon, only about five percent of the people enjoyed the 'prosperity' and 'peace' which were its hallmark.¹¹

Is it any wonder, then, that the Book of Amos speaks to the poor, the downtrodden, the marginalized and the oppressed today? The circumstances described above pertain to tenant-farmers and plantation workers in much of the "Third World"; Sri Lanka being a case in point. Most of the rural population there lives in abject poverty. The circumstances of the city dwellers are even worse because they do not have access to clean water, and are overwhelmed with all the detritus of urban living, for which there is no adequate means of disposal. Disease is a continuing problem – diseases like Cholera and Typhoid that are virtually non-existent in the West... And the gap between rich and poor is huge.

The epilogue to Amos, could be their dream. The Lord will destroy the sinful nation. The people will be scattered among the nations – there will be a diaspora but the common folk will be sustained, for the Lord will not let even a pebble fall to the ground. (Am. 9:8). The sinners, however, the landlords, the rich and wealthy will perish (Am.9:9).

When that has happened, the Lord will raise up the fallen people and rebuild them as a nation. (Am 9:11) When those days come, the worker shall be elevated over manager, and the tenant farmer over the landlord, and all that was wasteful – like the vineyards that produced wine for the rich, will be destroyed. (Am. 9:13). The Lord will restore his people to their rightful place, and restore to

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid, 182

¹¹ ibid, 181

them their land whose fruits shall be for their own use and enjoyment (Am 9:14)
And then never again will they be taken from the land. (Am. 9:15)

Such a vision is what sustains the downtrodden until Yahweh gives them strength to win victory.

As Elsa Tamez has noted, the historical agent of liberation is Yahweh acting through the oppressed. Liberation is always connected with the experience of God.¹² That God is Yahweh, a just God who stands by and rescues the suffering and the oppressed, again and again speeding to their aid.

¹² Tamez, 61

Annex A

The Book of Amos, Chapter 9 Epilogue: Messianic Perspective

8 The eyes of the Lord God are on this
 sinful kingdom:
I will destroy it from the face of the earth.
 But I will not destroy the house of
 Jacob completely,
 Says the Lord.

9 For see, I have given the command
to sift the house of Israel among all the nations,
 As one sifts with a sieve,
 Letting no pebble fall to the ground.

10 By the sword shall all sinners among my
 people die,
those who say, "Evil will not reach or
 overtake us."

11 On that day I will raise up
 the fallen hut of David;
 I will wall up its breaches,
 Raise up its ruins,
And rebuild it as in the days of old,

12 That they may conquer what is left of Edom
and all the nations that shall bear my name,
 say I, the Lord, who will do this.

13 Yes, days are coming,
 says the Lord,
When the plowman shall overtake the reaper,
And the vintager, him who sows the seed;
 The juice of grapes shall drip down
 The mountains,
And all the hills shall run with it.

14 I will bring about the restoration of my
 people Israel;
 Plant vineyards and drink the wine,
 Set out gardens and eat the fruits.

15 I will plant them upon their own ground;
 never again shall they be plucked
From the land I have given them,
 Say I, the Lord, your God.

Source: The New American Bible

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Curt Cadorette et al, Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992)

Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S. Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992)

Elsa Tamez, Bible of the Oppressed, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982)